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BEST PRACTICES FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF A NEW DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM

ЛУЧШИЕ МЕТОДИКИ ДЛЯ РАЗРАБОТКИ ПРОГРАММ НОВОГО ДИСТАНЦИОННОГО ОБУЧЕНИЯ

Abstract. *This article details the process for creating a distance education program from the formation of a development team through the creation, implementation and evaluation of courses. It explores current networking technologies and pedagogical approaches that combine to create a student experience that is satisfying for the current generation of students.*

Index terms: *distance education; pedagogy; student experience; design process*

Аннотация. *В данной статье подробно описан процесс создания программы дистанционного образования от формирования команды путем создания, реализации и оценки курсов. Она исследует текущие сетевые технологии и педагогические подходы, которые объединяются, чтобы создать студенческий опыт, который подходит для нынешнего поколения студентов.*

Ключевые слова: *дистанционное обучение, педагогика, студенческий опыт, процесс создания.*

For institutions that desire to extend their course offerings to students beyond the immediate geographic region of the institution, distance education courses are an increasingly viable option. This article explores the process of designing a distance education program from initial conception through creation and implementation. The ideas conveyed are based on experiences from the development of a fully online master's degree program. Even though the process is based on a higher education program, they can be applied to any distance program.

Benefits of Distance Education

Distance education is increasingly being chosen as a method of course delivery because it is accessible to a wider range of people than traditional courses. In regards to distance education, Lei and Gupta believe that "the most significant online technological development is the way that the former constraint of time and space has largely been removed by networking capabilities" [1]. Previous generations of learners were confined to classrooms for synchronous sessions set by their instructors. For many learners, especially those who sought to take part in specialized programs that were not readily available locally, this was a major deterrent that prevented them from participating. Now however, learners can choose to engage in distance education programs that easily fit their schedules and satisfy their specific needs.

Similarly, faculty members and the institutions they represent benefit from distance education. Tabata and Johnsrud explored faculty opinions about distance education and found that many of the previous perceptions are no longer issues [2]. Many faculty members expressed a belief that courses are difficult to design and implement and that they take more time than traditional courses. Even though this may be the case in some instances, the increased reliance on instructional designers has alleviated these concerns and instructors are finding that they can enjoy many of the same scheduling and geographical freedoms as their students.

Additionally, distance education has a variety of indirect benefits that should not be overlooked. Learners who take part in distance education courses are exposed to technology that they may not otherwise be able to use. They learn how to communicate globally, a skill that is increasingly beneficial in professional settings. By working in an asynchronous environment, they learn personal responsibility and how to schedule their time.

Roles of Key Personnel

The development of distance education programs is ideally completed by a collaborative team comprised of a program coordinator, faculty members and instructional designers. The program coordinator's role is to ensure that the development schedule is adhered to and that the other key personnel are completing their tasks. In this sense, they are project managers who have the final say over all aspects of the program. In addition to overseeing the development of courses, they often will be in charge of ensuring that the program is properly accredited and will work with marketers to attract students to the program.

Faculty members are the driving force behind a new program and will be the face of the program for the students. They are experts in their field and have valuable information to pass along to learners but they are usually not instructional experts. As subject matter experts, they have spent their careers learning everything they can about their field but in most cases they have never received training about how to deliver that information to others. In order to do so effectively, they should rely on instructional designers.

Instructional designers have one primary duty: to find the most effective ways to reach learners by exploring the current educational landscape, traits of distance students and incorporating emerging technologies. The role of instructional designers are often misunderstood and, as a result, they are kept out of the course design process. As mentioned above, faculty instructors are subject matter experts and can benefit from the instructional knowledge of the designers. However, many instructors believe they know the best way to teach the material and avoid seeking help from designers, relying on them solely for technological support. Of the three key personnel roles, instructional designers usually have the most experience working through the program design process so they can answer many questions that the other individuals may have.

Working as a collaborative team, the three key personnel have a greater potential for success than any of them would on their own. The team should meet on a regular basis so everyone stays informed about process and so issues can be worked out before they negatively impact the program.

Overview of Program Development Schedule

Once the key personnel are in place, the program development process can benefit from a well-defined schedule that includes an overall timeline for implementation and specific development milestones along the way.

The process should begin with a meeting that includes all key personnel and decision makers. The introduction meeting is important because it allows for the open flow of ideas about the program and what direction development should proceed in. It is the first opportunity for the program coordinator to present their vision and for each team member to provide feedback. This is a good time for faculty to propose courses that fit within the vision for the program and for instructional designers to suggest method to reach students. All suggestions may evolve through development but establishing a firm starting point is important for direction.

Next, the development of courses within the program can begin with faculty and instructional designers working collaboratively. For each course, these smaller teams should work together closely on a schedule that works for both of them. Ideally, the instructor will provide resources to the designer who will then determine the most efficient way to place them in the course. Optimally, course development should be completed prior to when student have access to the course but this is not always possible given the preferences of some instructors. It is critical to have an internal evaluation process as part of the development cycle to ensure that courses are up to the standards set for the program. By working as a team, the instructor and designer should have created a high quality course that will easily pass the evaluation criteria but it is an important step none the less to identify any issues that were overlooked.

Once development has been completed and students have been enrolled, the courses can be made available. It is important to note that even though the courses are complete, they should be continually reevaluated and improved so they remain current. Reviewing the content of courses

every two years is a good way to ensure that the information and instructional methods are current without overburdening course developers each semester.

Technology

Usually, decisions about what software is available for distance education are beyond the scope of the program itself. Institutions often mandate the use of a common learning management system and have specific software options available for use within. The way the technology is used however will be up to the program development team. Decisions should be made concerning the delivery method including the use of video, collaborative tools and assessment methods. Choices must be made based on the needs of the program and may vary from course to course. This is one of the major instances where instructional designers are critical to the process because they can make technological recommendations based on their research and experiences.

It is also important to consider the technological prowess of the learners when designing distance education programs. Digital immigrants “understand knowledge as an organized set of information” whereas digital natives “grew up in a world of interactive technologies” [3]. Generally, digital natives are accustomed to getting their information instantly through social media and are able to connect with their peers while being presented with information. They do not only want to be told about new topics but instead want to discuss them with their peers and, in many cases, form their opinions based on their social group and not as a result of their own experiences.

When analyzing incoming students, it is important to not make assumptions about every student just because their age aligns them with other students who are considered to be digital natives. Jones, Ramanau, Cross and Healing suggests that, because of differences in backgrounds and access to technology, not all young students are as accustomed to using cutting edge technology as their peers [4]. In these cases, it is the duty of the instructor to ensure that all students have an opportunity to become familiar with the technology used in the course so they will not be at a disadvantage overall.

Even though digital native students tend to be familiar with the technology used in distance courses, they are not necessarily pleased with online offerings replacing traditional teaching styles. Gulliver performed an informal survey of college students enrolled in his courses and found that students thought they were not getting as much out of an online or flipped course because they lost the one-on-one interaction with the instructor [5]. Instructors can do a lot to alleviate this problem but it does take effort. Most learning management systems have collaboration and communication tools built in that can be utilized to connect instructors and learners virtually face to face. The instructor can also offer traditional methods of communication, from phone calls to physical office hours, which allow students to make a connection with the instructor.

Pedagogy

When discussing distance education pedagogy, there are many aspects to consider but there are three that stick out as critical to program success. Decisions must be made about the synchronicity of courses, the methods of assessment and the factors that drive student success in courses.

Even though synchronous learning mimics traditional instruction more so than asynchronous learning, Murphy, Rodríguez-Manzanares and Barbour found that the majority of online classrooms are taught asynchronously [6]. They noted that one of the drawbacks of asynchronous learning however was that “interactivity in these self-paced forms of learning is minimal.”

In a similar study, Huang and Hsiao found that instructors and students preferred asynchronous classrooms because they provide more freedom in scheduling but they are not without issues [7]. For instructors, asynchronous courses can require more time, especially during initial development. This study also made important observations about communication in online courses. In synchronous courses, it is easier for extroverted students to control

conversations because other students become uncomfortable. Asynchronous courses however allow students to take their time and put more thought into their discussion contributions.

Bassett further discussed student communication in asynchronous environments and came to conclusions that bolster Huang and Hsiao's findings [8]. Asynchronous discussions allowed students to work together and learn from each other. There was an interesting observation made in Bassett's study which showed "there was a reluctance to disagree with any responses." People are, for the most part, conflict-averse and unwilling to tell other students that they do not support their opinions. Even though this seems civil and would prevent discussions from getting out of hand, there is room for discourse in the classroom at all levels of education and instructors should do their best to embrace it and encourage learners to support their beliefs with documented facts.

As far as assessment is concerned, courses that inhibit transformational learning include "both individual effort and group effort in the discussion" [9]. Regardless of the subject of the course, instructors must keep in mind that students should be assessed in some capacity. Meyer goes on to explain that for students to become completely engaged in their courses, they must participate in authentic learning, which is "real-world-based and problem-based." This is often referred to as project-based learning and simulates situations that students will face in their careers. Students are encouraged to be inquisitive and take an active role in their education without relying solely on their instructors for information.

In order for students to be successful in a course, they must know what is expected of them to show mastery of the subject. This is done by presenting the students with measurable learning objectives based on engaging higher levels of Bloom's Taxonomy [10]. At the conclusion of each course unit, students should be able to review the learning objectives and determine whether or not they completed that objective. If they did not, it is important to give them an opportunity to revisit the objective to prevent them from falling behind as they progress through the remainder of their coursework.

Student Experience

Often, it is easy for instructors to neglect the student experience and focus solely on delivering course materials. The current generation of students however expect more from their education and base their views about it on their experiences outside of the programs they are enrolled in. Effective distance education programs have two major components which define student success. The first of which is socialization, both with their instructors and with their peers. Secondly, they need to have the cognitive capacity to receive and interpret knowledge.

With some exceptions, learners that decide to enter distance programs have experience with the internet through casual use, communicating with others or through previous learning endeavors. Verčič and Verčič found that digital native learners have extensive experience with social media [11]. In their study, "nearly all (91.5%) responded that they use some form of social networking platforms." This shows that learners should not have a problem interacting with their peers and could perhaps bring useful information to the class through their external social interactions.

Cognitive learning on the other hand is not something that is typically developed through a typical learner's online experience. According to Gofron, younger learners are accustomed to on demand information that is passed through social media and quick online searches [3]. They do not have to spend time gathering knowledge from various sources and forming their own understanding. Additionally, they tend to be more influenced by the opinions of their peers than they do by more credible sources. Karampiperis states that "learners with different cognitive characteristics require different filtering of content to suit their learning needs" [12].

Varying cognitive levels can be a major hurdle for distance instructors. In traditional classrooms, instructors are able to engage their students based on observed traits. In distance courses however, it can be difficult to analyze where students are cognitively and to see when students are struggling since there is usually not as much direct contact between instructors and students. Moore defined this issue as transactional distance and suggested that it can be a

hindrance for many students [13]. Transactional distance is not limited to geographical distance but can also be created by the chosen instructional methods. It is easy for distance students to feel disconnected when the instructor's personality is removed from the course. This can be somewhat counteracted through the use of video and by having instructors provide ample feedback on assessments. It should be noted however that all students are different and what works to engage one student may not work on another.

One way to help students overcome potential issues with courses is to provide a consistent look and feel for all courses within a program. Using custom course design templates is an easy way to provide a uniform experience for students while still giving instructors the freedom to design content as they wish. This allows students to get into each course in the program and have a familiar layout. They will know how to navigate the course and use the tools present within allowing them to focus on learning. Additionally, the use of templates also make development easier for instructors since they do not have to spend as much time on course layout.

Program and Course Review

As noted in the program development schedule section, proper review is a vital step in ensuring that courses are up to the standards of the program. Often, instructors begin the development process for distance education courses by applying the principles that they have found to be successful in traditional face-to-face courses. That method sounds reasonable because the ultimate goal in distance courses is to give the students an experience that mimics the classroom. However, that approach is lacking because they do not have a full understanding of what does and does not work online. By utilizing a detailed rubric that includes information about what makes courses effective, instructors have a guide for development and instructional designers have an unbiased way to evaluate courses once development is completed.

Initial evaluation is only part of the process however. Once a course has been offered to students, it is critical to get their feedback on what made the course successful or unsuccessful. Student feedback is important because if students are not happy with the course, they are unlikely to do well. The student experience should always be the driving force behind aspects of courses. If changes need to be made after feedback is received, they can be incorporated before the course is offered again.

Conclusion

Regardless of the subject matter of the program, distance education can be an option when a department's goal is to reach a broader base of students than they would using traditional methods. By working collaboratively and following proven pedagogical guidelines, program development teams can create student-focused courses that meet the needs of today's generation of learners.

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